

Four Winds Farm

THE NEW YORKER



A HANDFUL OF SEEDS
IN A
WORLD FULL OF WAR
— BY SASHA SCATTER

DROOK



A Handful of Seeds in a World Full of War

Slug and Lettuce Column Spring 2003

BY SKYLA LATER
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The Seedkeepers

Burn our Land.

Burn our dreams.

Pour acid on our songs.

Cover with sawdust the blood of our massacred people.

Muffle with your technology

the screams of all that is free, wild and indigenous.

Destroy our grass and soil.

Raze to the ground every farm and every village

our ancestors had built.

Every tree, every home, every book, every law

and all equity and harmony.

Flatten with your bombs every valley.

Erase with your edits our past, our literature,
our metaphor.

Dunude the forest and the earth

till no insect no bird no word

can find a place to hide.

Do that and more.

I do not fear your tyranny.

I do not despair ever.

For I guard a seed,

a little live seed,

that I shall safeguard and plant again.



(PALESTINIAN POEM OF UNKNOWN AUTHORSHIP)

The day after they began dropping this latest round of bombs on Iraq, I was sitting in a greenhouse on a farm two hours north of New York City, planting flats of broccoli seeds. It was an overcast day with the sun periodically peaking through the clouds and I was surrounded by flats of baby seedlings: red and green and yellow and orange stemmed chards, golden and blood beets, twelve varieties speckled and colored lettuce, dozens of kinds of hot and sweet peppers, onions and leeks sticking their monocot heads out of the soil. The air smelled like Springtime, like rich compost and firewood smoke: like life and

There's a vast network out there of organic farms with different styles and philosophies all over the place that are happy to have willing workers and passing travelers stopping in for short periods during the spring and summer to help out who want to learn from them. Check out these websites to learn more and hook up with folks.

www.organicvolunteers.org

www.attra.org

www.woof.org

If you're interested in coming out and working with me here at Four Winds for a couple days, we're going to organize some work days throughout the Spring and Summer. Beginning in June I'll be making CSA deliveries to a town called Peekskill every week which is right on the Metro-North commuter line from New York City and I can pick people up in my truck. Poughkeepsie is the last stop on the commuter train line and we're about a 25 minute drive away from there. It's also pretty easy hitchhiking around here. It's beautiful. Swimming holes, woods to explore, amazing sunsets, old rain trains to ride bicycles on. I have this not so secret agenda to recolonize the Lower Hudson Valley with our friends (or at least have a bunch of cool folks move out here. There's a new anarchist collective that's started up and a whole scene developing around the New Paltz/Kingston/Poughkeepsie area. If you want to visit, drop me a line or give me a call in the East Coast evenings and we can talk about it. I'm really into having people around and teaching people stuff I know who are curious and like to work hard. Farming is definitely not a solo activity, it takes a community.



ways, but in the end I've realized that it's not the killing of animals that I'm really opposed to. What I'm opposed to is the factory farming industry that enslaves animals and condemns them to a life of concentration camp like misery. I'm opposed to the whole fucked system that keeps people separated from where their food comes from and turns everything into a product with a monetary value and puts profit before anything else. But like so many things, it's a scale issue. I think our place is the polar opposite of a factory farm. As my farming partner Polly likes to say: "These animals have a great life everyday except the last one. And dying sucks no matter how it happens." I work with the animals everyday, proud that our little farm is a model of sustainability a viable alternative to the factory farm industry.

Resistance is Fertile.

So I have this little dream that a couple years from now, my friends and I are going to be trading our vegetable and herb seeds the same way we trade our travel zines full of stories and music from our underground bands. More and more of us are moving out onto land and building the urban/rural connections that are going to take our movement to the next level. I have a feeling the alternative models are going to get more and more badass and as quickly as the mainstream picks up on them, we'll be out there in the fields creating more. This is how we will survive in the future. I am perpetually inspired by the budding network of East Coast radical farmers I see growing from the Victory Gardens project up in Maine to Caty Crabb and her crew down in North Carolina. We are the guardians of diversity and life in a world of monoculture and war. And amidst it all, if you haven't noticed, we are growing.

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This is what I kept thinking as I dropped those seeds into the soil and placed trays of seedflats into the metal sink to soak up water from below: so much of what seems to be missing in our modern lives is collective memory. We're so disconnected from our own past. Most of us have no idea what life was like for people in the world a hundred years ago: our ancestors stories have been replaced by incredibly wack TV shows and the food we buy in supermarkets was genetically engineered in laboratories somewhere. As I took the seedflats out of the sink and stuck them on the heating pad to germinate I couldn't help but think: **It's easy to control people who don't know their own history and have no strong connection to the world around them.**

These days the government and corporations seem to be able to program us like computers: trigger our emotions with slick video clips and rewrite their new versions of the Truth every couple months -- feed it to us like those mass produced AOL free minutes disks that magically show up in the mail all over the place. The TV these days looks to me like some deranged Hollywood war movie I watched when I was a kid, I'm so desensitized to the reality that they're actually dropping *real* bombs on the other side of the world and people like me with flesh and blood and families are dying horrible deaths.

The Ugly Relationship Between Industrial Agriculture and War.

This is all in the history books: at the end of World War II, American engineers used the technology designed for battle tanks and applied it to building huge farming tractors. The nitrate reserves from building bombs were turned into agricultural fertilizers and the nerve gas stockpiles were used to make industrial pesticides. The factories built for making war munitions became the factories for industrial farm equipment and chemicals.

Modern Food Production #101: Industrial farms are all about the practice of Monoculture planting single crops over wide ranges of space that can be harvested uniformly. Monocultures need big machines to plant and harvest them. Monocultures need pesticides and herbicides because they don't have any built in biological diversity so

the bugs and diseases love them. Monocultures need to be tilled in every year, destroying any soil structure, *any memory in the land* of what came before.

Smaller diversified farms are actually way more productive and way more sustainable. We plant the full range of temperate vegetable crops in the same fields, using companion planting and polyculture as much as possible to maximize space use. We rotate where the crops are placed every year to confuse the pests and to give the land time to rest. Rather than tilling the land every year we hand weed the beds in the spring and add new layers of compost with lots of straw mulch to keep down weeds and hold in water. Rather than spraying chemical pesticides, we grow flowers and make hedgerows and do everything we can to create habitat for beneficial insect predators who naturally eat the pests. We select and breed our own seeds and adapt them to our agroecosystems so that we don't have to buy seeds that were made to be used in chemical agriculture systems. On our farm we grow fifty different varieties of tomatoes!

We'll be cleaning up the ecological disasters created by the monoculture model long after people realize what a bad idea it was. But monocultures are not really about efficiency or progress like they love to talk about: **monocultures are about control.**

War is not so different. It doesn't have to be this way. Like modern agriculture, bombs are not about efficiency or progress, or Peacekeeping, or Justice, or whatever line of bullshit they're trying to feed us on today's *programming*: **bombs are about control.** Bombs and monoculture are about a small amount of people dominating over the majority.

Just you watch my friends: when they finish bombing Iraq and move onto the next "rogue nation", the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund will lend the new government money to "rebuild" the country and they'll make them sign "structural adjustment" agreements to privatize everything and let in American businesses to import and export as they please build their strip mall death culture everywhere else. It's about integration into the market system and control of oil, it's a big corporate scam. But remember that amidst this global backdrop of monoculture and

replace the missing parts with chemicals, our system works naturally and works way more effectively. The animal manure we use is alive with microorganisms that suppress disease and enhance plant growth, it's high in organic matter that helps hold soil particles together and prevents nutrient loss, and it's loaded with trace minerals and micronutrients. The cows and pigs and sheep are an integral part of the food growing system.

I could talk to the self-righteous urbanite militant vegan that was my teenage self, these are some of the words I'd probably say to him: look, *city boy* I want to see *you* grow all your own "non-animal" protein without huge industrial machinery and enormous reserves of petroleum. Get that genetically engineered plastic wrapped long distanced shipped tofu out of your mouth before you dis my lifestyle, kid. If we don't use animal manures to build up the soil structure and fertility, I'd really like to know where the fertility is going to come from to keep growing our food every year?

Honestly: knowing what I know about how industrial agriculture rapes the earth, there's no question in my mind that it's more violent to grow monocrops of corn, soy, canola, and safflower process and package the plants into oils -- and ship them all over the country in huge trucks, than it is to raise a dozen happy pigs and slaughter them for their meat and fat. I try a lot of my food in pig lard these days and I can see the pigs outside playing in the mud from the window of the farmhouse kitchen. This is the true *of school*, and it makes sense to me: it's *honest* and *real* in a way that the cheap plastic bottle of canola just ain't.

There's this ironic Punitanism among animal rights activists that in trying to be in solidarity with the cute furry creatures we do our hardest not to act like them. We impose our human ideas of values and project hierarchical and oppressive relationships on their behaviors and our relations to them that just don't correlate to the human analogies we make. And yo man: a lot of that processed soy food people eat is a bunch of fucking garbage that I wouldn't even feed to our pigs. Get real now.

I'm definitely not saying I have all the answers or that I don't question all the time my right to take something else's life, I do think about this stuff everyday and I have a lot to learn and I'm definitely not set in my

everyday with a guy named Juan from Oaxaca, Mexico and my friend Kevin who grew up in this neck of the woods. Four of the acres on the land are used to grow vegetables and the rest of the land is used as pasture for cows, sheep, pigs, chickens and turkeys and ducks. I live in a barn with strawbale walls and a greenhouse attached to the side. There are huge vining overwintered tomato plants right outside my window that I'm looking at as I write these words.

Putting the Culture Back in Agriculture

One of the great things about working here is that Four Winds Farm is part of a relatively recent movement in farming known as CSA or Community Supported Agriculture. Rather than selling our produce wholesale to a market, CSA farms have members who buy "shares" in the season's harvest, and in return receive a box of fresh produce every week. It's a great system because as farmer's we're guaranteed money at the beginning of the season and the members have a direct connection to the people that grow their food. They can come out here and bring their kids and even work out in the fields with us if they want. The whole thing is about building community and reconnecting people to the food on their table. Rebuilding the culture that's been lost as people have moved away from the land.

Imaginary Conversations with my Internal Vegan

I think a lot about how to feed all my friends without the outlandish and inevitably disastrous systems set up by industrial agriculture. How would we do it? It's a tricky one on a lot of levels. As I've had to learn the hard way over the years many a time, life is not as black and white as a CRASS record sleeve.

This place considers themselves to be a Biodynamic farm. What that means is that they strive to have a closed circle where nothing needs to be brought in from the outside to keep the farm running. The animals eat the grass, we use the animal manure to build the soil to grow the plants, we eat the animals, everything is intimately connected in a tight circle. Unlike industrial factory farms that separate all the pieces and

war, there are always rebels and dreamers who slip through the cracks and bring their dreams and seeds and visions of a new world with them into the future. Although you may find it hard to believe, in many ways a handful of tiny broccoli seeds is more powerful than all those bombs put together. The bombs destroy cultures, erase history, breed fear and disempowerment. Seeds create culture, bridge history, keep people fed and healthy, give people control over their lives.

The tiny broccoli seeds I've been planting are *living history* they have a collective memory stretching back thousands of years to a Mediterranean coast where their wild relatives grew, passing through millions of farmers hands, culled and coevolved, selected and reselected -- reincarnated every year in gardens and farms across the world. The broccoli seeds have the genetic memory of thousands of years of survival and adaptation through wars and plagues and all kinds of bullshit. My friend in Oregon who runs a small alternative seed company grew these seeds and passed them onto me as a gift of friendship. Now it's my turn to tend to them grow them out and pass them on to my friends like good stories.

The Cityboy and the Farmer.

The thick layer of snow just finally melted a couple days ago. The moon was all ripe in the sky reflecting off the glimmering puddles and I was outside breathing in the cool Spring air. Suddenly there's a whole other world exposed all the things that have just been lying dormant are stirring and rubbing the sleep out of their eyes. When I wake up in the morning I swear I can feel Spring in my fingertips like a serge of chlorophyll in the greening grass outside my door. The chickweed and dandelions are flowering on the garden beds and the early pollinators are anxiously sucking up the nectar from the tiny blossoms. Baby lambs are just starting to be born, beautiful angelic looking creatures with black curious eyes. The Chinese cabbage in the greenhouse is going to seed and I've been making bouquets of edible yellow brassica flowers and red Russian kale stalks to give to my friends. There's still love and beauty in times of war.

There's an unending supply of work to do around here. The beds need

to prepared for the direct seeded crops like spinach and peas and carrots and beans. We weed the beds and add composted manure from the cows and sheep and chickens. The perennial crops (perennial means that don't die in the winter) need to be pruned like the raspberries and asparagus and apples, the herbs like echinacea and thyme and mint and oregano. There are seeds that need to be sown and tiny seedlings that need to be potted up into larger containers. The two greenhouses are full of little plants which need to be watered and tended to. All the animals are going out to pasture after hanging out in the barn all winter eating hay bales. That means setting up electric fences and filling up water troughs, making sure everyone's happy.

One of the things I love about farmwork is that it's really challenging and you have to be pretty sharp to be able to juggle all the dozens of daily tasks, but there is plenty of time in the day when I just get to work with my body and let my mind wander. Stacking hay bales, weeding beds, spreading compost, potting up seedlings, mucking the barn I'm writing stories in the back of my head all day.

But let me back up a second.

Does anyone out there remember how I started writing a column for this magazine? For those who've recently tuned in to the underground rebel pirate station that is *Slug and Lettuce*, this is how it happened: five years ago I moved to an organic farm on a tiny island in British Columbia with my girlfriend. I'd written a story that I really liked about growing up in the punk scene in New York City and I wanted my old friend Chris Boarts to publish it in her magazine so I sent it to her on a floppy disk. As an afterthought I put an extra file on the disk with a bunch of my typed up journal entries from working on the farm so that she could get a sense of what was going on in my life. Then I forgot about it.

Flash forward a couple months and all of a sudden I started getting a pile of mail from a bunch of teenage punk kids in the suburbs of North America who wanted to know more about sustainable agriculture and organic farming apprenticeships! I figured it out when I finally got a copy of the magazine that instead of publishing my urban punk rock

story, Chris decided to print my journal entries from the farm.

So I start answering mail and writing some more and by the time my eight month apprenticeship was done, I knew somehow my life calling had to do with merging the seemingly unmergeable worlds of the city and the country. The last bunch of years I've been trying in my own way to bridge that chasm between the fact that I'm a total city kid who thrives off of the energy of all you freaks and needs to be surrounded by mad culture and creativity and diversity and the fact that I'm so much healthier and happier when I'm living under the stars on land and growing my own food. Lately I've noticed there are lots of us in the same quandary. It's a pretty common dilemma in our community braving the loneliness (and usually whiteness) of rural living or braving the chaos and urban alienation of the city.

Anyway, lots of exciting things have happened in my life since that time, like getting wrapped up in the fight to save the NYC community gardens; the WTO protests and watching birth of the post-Seattle anti-globalization movement blossom everywhere; being locked up involuntarily in psych wards and jails on both coasts and diagnosed manic-depressive; the twin towers falling down in a fiery mess and permanently altering the global political landscape in terrifying ways; good friends jumping off bridges; living in a collective house in Oakland for three years with a bunch of anarchist freaks and guerilla gardeners, all kinds of crazy shit. But really I've known this whole time that what I've wanted to do was settle down out in the country near a big city and be a farmer.

Four Winds Farm

Okay, so here I am, farming. Except this time, instead of being on a tiny island on the West coast of Canada with a bunch of hippies, I'm two hours away from the island of Manhattan where I grew up. Close enough for my friends to come and visit me and take a break from the smog and concrete and close enough for me to leave and get my periodic city fix and dance and ride my bicycle around and check out all the beautiful people wandering the streets.

I live on a 24 acre piece of land known as Four Winds Farm with Polly and Jay Armour and their two kids Sara and Josh. I work in the fields